pure breeding

Rewind to 1994: Los Angeles was struck by a major earthquake and Nelson Mandela was elected president of South Africa. And in the performance car world, enthusiasts could choose between the Subaru Impreza WRX and Mitsubishi Lancer GSR. But while the ‘Rex’ powered on into auto folklore, the GSR faded into obscurity. Welcome 2009, and it’s game on again with the arrival of the Lancer Ralliart.

STORY BARRY GREEN | PHOTOS MARK HORSBURGH

AT $39,990, THE WRX SHAPES up $3000 cheaper than the Ralliart, a not inconsiderable sum in these times of financial volatility.

The usual spectre of depreciation is unclear in this instance, with the Glass’s Guide having no residual figures yet for the Ralliart and only a one-year figure of 72 percent for the WRX.

The Subaru is cheaper by some $300 in servicing costs over 75,000 km, despite requiring more frequent service intervals (12,500 km) than the Ralliart (15,000 km).

It’s the other way round with our standard basket of parts (tyres, filters, front brake pads and rotors, wiper blades), where the WRX is about $150 dearer. The big difference is insurance, with the Subaru being quoted at $3516 a year – nearly three times that of its rival.

On test, the WRX proved fractionally more frugal, averaging 11.8 litres/100 km with a best figure of 7.8, while the Ralliart returned 12.2 and 9.4 respectively. The former’s preferred ‘brew’ is 95 RON, while the latter...
drinks the more expensive 98 RON premium fuel.

Each carries an impressive warranty, the Ralliart enjoying a five year/130,000 km and the WRX a three year/unlimited km coverage.

As the kid brothers of the range topping Evo and STI, the pair come well equipped with performance gear and styling overtones. Among other things, the WRX boasts monogrammed seats and highlighting, a bonnet scoop, roofline spoiler and red brake callipers, while the Ralliart scores a scoop, rear spoiler, dual chrome exhaust and alloy pedals.

The Ralliart has some extras over the WRX, such as driver’s knee airbag, smart key (or keyless entry), active centre differential, taller wheels, dusk-sensing headlights and rain-sensing wipers.

The Subaru, though, has Xenon self-levelling headlights, steering wheel reach adjustment, cargo tie downs and additional speakers – something the Mitsubishi lacks.

Both cars come with a space-saver spare tyre only.

It’s line ball in the driver comfort stakes. As might be expected, both cars’ front seats take on a sporty shape but cloth, not leather, is standard fare, along with manually operated adjustment that lacks lumbar and cushion tilt.

Being hatches, cargo space is limited, so if load-carrying solutions are a priority, the sedan variant available for both models might be a better option.

Delve under the bonnet and it’s interesting how Mitsubishi and Subaru have chosen a different tack in arriving at their idea of an affordable hot hatch.

The Ralliart sports a detuned version of the Evo’s turbocharged and inter-cooled 2.0-litre, four-cylinder engine minus twin scroll turbocharger. Power output consequently drops to 177 kW (from 217 kW) and torque to 343 Nm (from 366 Nm).

While the torque outputs are identical, the Mitsubishi gives away 18 kW to the WRX’s 2.5-litre, turbo, boxer four-cylinder. Being a portly 220 kg heavier doesn’t help, so it’s no surprise that the Mitsubishi lost ground in all six of our acceleration tests.

When tested thoroughly, the WRX’s boxer engine pulls strongly and progressively. It’s impressive from 3000 rpm, emitting a sporty whistle as the turbocharger spools up. The Ralliart’s engine is not so sweet sounding and while it might not get the job done as quickly, an accommodating spread of torque between 2500 and 4750 rpm makes for competent performance.

The cars differ in type of transmission too. The Ralliart has a dual-clutch, six-speed transmission (TC-SST) offering a choice of auto or manual modes, the latter by gear-shift or ‘paddles’ mounted on the steering wheel.

Around town, in auto mode, it’s often guilty of holding too high a gear, which impairs driveability. But give the Ralliart its head out on the open road, in manual mode using the paddle shifters, and the TC-SST delivers crisp, fluent shifts.
Subaru, on the other hand, has stuck with a five-speed manual. It’s not perfect, either, suffering from a long throw and notchy shift sensation. We suspect that the latter ailment might have something to do with the synchro loading.

Ralliart inherits Evo’s active centre differential, allowing the selection of different chassis set-ups matched to the road surface: tarmac, gravel or ice (should you ever encounter that).

The WRX has no such smart technology, instead relying on a well set up suspension and tyre package to make for consummate cornering. Hit a few bumps on the way in or out, though, and the car can become unsettled. This contrasts with that of the Ralliart, which exhibits more consistent body control under provocation. There’s no doubt that the Subaru provides a much softer ride.

Testers were unimpressed with the WRX’s steering. While not short of feel, it is way too light and quick. The Ralliart, by comparison, is much better weighted, particularly on initial turn in.

Each being all wheel drive, there’s reassuring grip at all times, although we couldn’t help but wonder how much better the Mitsubishi might be with different tyres. The 215/45R18 Yokohama Advans seem particularly prone to squeal.

Both cars exhibit strong, progressive brakes which could not be faulted under normal road use. In a series of stops from 80 km/h, however, the WRX pulled up consistently shorter.

Road noise, mostly from tyre rumble, is evident in both and the Ralliart also suffers from some engine harshness.

So, here we have two good, but not great, hot hatches. Perhaps it’s a sign of the world moving on, but the WRX doesn’t ooze the charisma it once did. That said, it still offers considerable “bang for buck” and shades the Ralliart, of which we expected more.

### Subaru Impreza WRX Hatch

**Price:** $39,990  
**Safety:** Six airbags, electronic stability program, anti-lock brakes, electronic brakeforce distribution, brake assist.  
**Key Features:** All wheel drive, six-stack CD with 10 speakers, climate control, sports seats, self-levelling xenon headlights, alarm/immobiliser, hill start assist.  
**Engine:** 2.5-litre, turbo boxer 4-cylinder  
**Fuel (ADR figure):** 10.4 litres/100 km  
**Crash Rating:**  
**Emission Rating:**  
**For:** Performance, handling, price, safety  
**Against:** Expensive to insure, notchy gear change  
**Star Rating (Out of 5):** ★★★★☆

### Mitsubishi Ralliart Sportback

**Price:** $42,990  
**Safety:** Seven airbags, electronic stability program, anti-lock brakes, electronic brakeforce distribution, brake assist.  
**Key Features:** All wheel drive, climate control, six-stack CD, cruise control, ‘smart’ key, Bluetooth capability, active centre differential, 18-inch alloy wheels  
**Engine:** 2.0-litre, turbo, double overhead cam, MIVEC 4-cylinder  
**Fuel (ADR figure):** 10.2 litres/100 km  
**Crash Rating:**  
**Emission Rating:**  
**For:** Cheaper to insure, safety, compliant ride  
**Against:** Tyre noise, no reach-adjustable steering  
**Star Rating (Out of 5):** ★★★☆